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# Whose Frito Pie Is It? Competing Nostalgias in American Kitsch

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**WHOSE FRITO PIE IS IT? COMPETING NOSTALGIAS IN AMERICAN  
KITSCH**

**A thesis submitted to  
Regis College  
The Honors Program  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for Graduation with Honors  
by**

Pearl Shields

**May 2009**

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

In the fall of my sophomore year, I took a class entitled “Spectacle and Society.” The class focused primarily on Postmodern readings of sensational literature, films and plays, incorporating existential texts and other critical commentaries on the state of popular culture. Before taking the class, I had no idea that academics engaged in the study of popular culture seriously. I’m not quite sure what I thought they did—I guess I thought they stuck to writing snarky blogs in independent coffee shops. At any rate, the knowledge that the seemingly trite, common place and downright *fake* could be studied in a meaningful way blew my mind!

Certainly the study of popular culture doesn’t have an explicit connection to Ignatian educational values, but inherently it does. The Jesuits have long known that hard work and thoughtful engagement with this world, rather than the next, was the key to a justice-filled life with God. The concept that faith begins where you’re at, not where you want to be, is one that has driven my education and my faith life. Popular culture is where we are at, in any given time. To draw something meaningful, therefore, out of the new, out of what currently reflects the state of things today is incredibly important to understanding ourselves and our culture, and integral to Jesuit education.

I am extremely proud and happy with this work. Throughout my research and writing, I had a lot of fun challenging myself to think critically about that which we really aren’t supposed to think critically about. I was extremely excited to have the Santa Fe section accepted to the Far West Popular Culture Association conference in Las Vegas

this winter; however, the decision not to go was the right one. I feel more confident talking about this project than I ever have, and I regret that I didn't feel the same at that time. I learned a lot about professionalism, preparation for graduate school activities, and thinking about my work with a constant, critical eye.

This work would have been impossible without a community of scholars. I would like to express gratitude for this community in the formation of my work. First and foremost, I would like to thank anyone and everyone that contributed to this conversation, whether by asking me endless questions regarding the nature of kitsch or suggesting readings or ideas for my work. There are too many to name, but I appreciate the individual contributions you made.

My primary research on my case studies started, unknowingly, over fifteen years ago with my first trip to EPCOT Center. I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents, who indulged us in seven different trips to Walt Disney World. Thank you for those memories, despite actually wanting to be at Gettysburg walking around battlefields.

Mariah Shields and Rachel Tyrrel, thanks for letting me crash in your dorm room so many times in Santa Fe. I appreciate your iron will to withstand several nights of the loudest air mattress in history. And if your hands were metal, that would mean something.

Dr. Tom Bowie, words hardly express my gratitude for everything you've done for me. Thanks for your advice in the early days of this project, as well as your guidance over the last four years as a wonderful mentor and friend.

Dr. Daryl Palmer, you encourage me always to think critically and deeply about my work and its relationship to life. I deeply appreciate your insight into my project. You

inspire me on to graduate school and I value your guidance, explicit and implicit, over the last four years.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge Dr. Karen Adkins, my thesis advisor, for her endless enthusiasm. By encouraging me to submit writing every week, the task of this piece was lessened, and extremely enjoyable. Thanks for all those lunches, coffees, gossip sessions and letters of recommendation. Your support, frequent cheerleading, motivational speaking, and guidance are evident throughout this project, and, truly, I couldn't have done it without you. Thanks for caring so much about this project and about me as well.

## **Note on Terminology**

Throughout my thesis, I use several names and terms that can be confusing without a sense of context. I have tried to clarify the use of these terms as much as possible, but the following notes may be helpful for decoding.

- The Five and Dime is used to refer to the specific store in Santa Fe, New Mexico, not the traditional name for drugstores of its type, unless noted.
- I typically refer to The Walt Disney Company, the corporation containing all Disney companies and departments, including its theme park division, by its first name. It is distinctly clear, however, that when I abbreviate using “Disney,” that I am discussing the corporation, and not the wishes or agenda of Walt Disney himself. I also use “Walt” to disassociate from the company. Generally, it is good form to disassociate Walt Disney from any actions or events regarding Epcot Center.
- I refer to Walt Disney’s conception of the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow either by its full name or in its capitalized acronym, EPCOT. Epcot Center has undergone a variety of name changes since 1982. Though not completely accurate, I use the term Epcot Center in reference to the park as it existed until a couple of years ago. The Walt Disney Company changed the name to Epcot Theme Park, its current name, and the distinction is important.



- Based on my research, I determined the significant historical divisions within Epcot's history. I divide the paper in that chapter only by era because it facilitates greater understanding of the park's progression in relation to kitsch.

## Introduction

This is a conversation. When I first embarked on this project I had the naïve idea that it wouldn't be difficult to come to an understanding about what kitsch is, what it does and what it means. I was wrong, very wrong. It was, and still is, a challenge *explaining* my thesis to others in a meaningful way.

Most of my fellow students don't know what kitsch is. Most adults know it when they see it, but can't define it. I don't blame them. Defining kitsch is like nailing Jell-O to the wall. When given an obligatory pink flamingo or garden gnome example, however, everyone instantly knows what I'm talking about, proceeding to ask me what else is kitsch. "Is the Arc de Triomphe kitsch?" "Is Britney Spears kitsch?" "Are fake designer purses kitsch?" Each time I confirm the kitschiness of these and the other examples provided, their faces fall a little bit. Kitsch has such a negative connotation in our culture because it is so steeped in the context of taste and authenticity. If it is not in good taste, if it is not real, it must be inferior. Truthfully, I don't like falling faces in conversation. I try to pep things up by questioning the validity of the authentic. "Do you think you're really fooling anyone with that knock off Coach bag? Certainly there must be something good about buying imitation designer bags, right?"

I started with the same questions about kitsch, but focused with an eye toward our American culture, arguably the most omnipresent breeding ground for kitsch in the world. Consequently, in thinking about the popular American culture in which I live and engage with on a daily basis, it seemed necessary to make my thoughts and experiences a

necessary part of this thesis. Throughout, the “I” plays an important role in the narrative of these kitsch monuments. I simply offer my own perspective in the legion of voices dialoguing with one another, throughout my arguments.

It is no surprise, then, that I concede a bit of subjectivity on my part. I tried very hard to paint an objective picture of kitsch in this thesis. Upon finishing my project, however, I discovered with great bitterness that doing so was impossible. In a discussion on a topic so weighted in arguments of aesthetic judgment, there can really be no objectivity; aesthetic judgment has standards on which it is based, with a required subjectivity resulting from the very existence of the standards themselves. With that, I want to explain, very clearly, that my main focus is not on aesthetic judgments, and that I don’t wish to address the argument on relativity and aestheticism, not in this work at least.

Moreover, I don’t mean to focus on any moral dilemmas or issues that arise as a consequence of this topic. Clement Greenberg’s rhetoric condemns those that like kitsch explicitly, something that is wildly elitist and snobbish. I grant that at times, my language too may condemn or celebrate fellow *kitschmenschen*, but I don’t necessarily want to make the personal opinions of others a focus of my work. But with that, I feel it is necessary to disclose that I, in fact, enjoy kitsch. I think kitsch has to be personal, especially American kitsch, because it is so steeped in emotionality and nostalgia that it can’t *help* but be personal. That is why many become deflated when realizing that what they love is widely considered low-class. For me, however, and many others, kitsch is an ironic enjoyment. I enjoy tacky things because they’re tacky. Some, especially those that value the art of Thomas Kinkade, choose an authentic appreciation for the kitsch themes

present within the work. It's not that they're unperceptive in not seeing bad taste. His works simply pull at heartstrings, invoking a pleasant feeling of nostalgia.<sup>1</sup>

There are so many places, items and people that would have fit the American kitsch paradigm I developed. Picking only two to research was an interesting process. Frito Pie, for example, was an accident. While researching a visit to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where my sister currently attends film school, I came across an article published on the online *New York Times* entitled, "Treating Mom to Art, Opera and Lots of Chiles." The title's article summed up what are probably the three best known facets of "The City Beautiful." I hoped to come across something that would be both cheap and fun for college students like my sister and me.<sup>2</sup> The article, chronicling a travel journalist's trip to Santa Fe with his museum docent mother was, for the most part, a pretentious appeal for a city that catered to the very wealthy and art enthusiasts. Given the article's topic, I was amused to find a short paragraph about a literal cheap thrill right in the middle of the city:

We did find one bargain, though not really at a boutique: the Frito pie, \$4.15 at the Five and Dime General Store on the tourist-flooded plaza. Back behind the aisles of shampoos and Hallmark cards lay the lunch counter where this delicacy — a small bag of chips sliced open and drenched with [sic] chile — was allegedly invented in 1962, when this was still a Woolworth's. The pie is a satisfying snack.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction is a problem of interpretive aesthetics. There is no hope for avoiding subjectivity; in fact, I employ the "I" to encourage thinking about this work in spite of the problems of subjectivity. To quote Mary Schmich, values of aesthetics and my musings on them are "no more reliable than my own, meandering experience".

<sup>2</sup> She was quick to point out that Santa Fe is the perfect place for a film school—there isn't anything else you can afford to do in the city except rent movies.

In fact, it weighed a ton — something like three pounds of meaty, beany, salty, corny goodness (Gross).

I had to go to the Five and Dime so we could imbibe in this seemingly delicious “snack” that took me back to the lunch line at Rolling Hills Elementary. My sister, hesitant, walked into the Five and Dime with me for the first time, and stood grumbling while I ogled at all the cheap souvenirs, pointing out the sad humor in a Route 66 ceramic bell that commemorates a road that officially no longer exists. We walked back to the snack counter, and my sister was immediately put off by its greasy sheen and sticky counters. It was a little concerning to me too, so we ended up leaving without Frito Pies. It took a return trip months later to finally eat. I chose the Five and Dime as one of my case studies because it, unlike Mount Rushmore, is a relatively unknown center of competing nostalgias outside New Mexico. Accordingly, I avoid the biases people may have for highly nostalgic or beloved items of kitsch to reveal my analytical motives, showing kitsch to new eyes.

To balance the general unfamiliarity of the Frito Pie, I chose a site beloved to many, including myself. Epcot is more personal for me than the Frito Pie. Disney World has always been a favorite vacation site for my family, and I’ve been six times over seven Disney World trips. As a child, I remember enjoying the *possibility* each pavilion held, whether it was for my future as a child of technology, or as a world traveler. It was like looking at life-sized guidebooks of all the countries I wanted to visit. Epcot was one of the first things that came to mind when I thought about American kitsch—it’s deeply imitative, false, and replicated, down to the tiniest details. To want authenticity in a deeply ironic way is fascinating to me and important to this topic.

The Epcot story is a long one and full of places for analysis. For example, Steve Mannheim's Walt Disney and the Quest for Community is a book based solely on Walt's initial proposal for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. Even more has been written in various analytical texts about Disney World. I tried to give the best general overview of Epcot's history and gradual transformation to theme park while focusing on the most important details. Eventually, I want to continue the conversation about Epcot in future works because I think Epcot is due for a major restructuring and renovation. The park, in many ways, has always suffered from an identity crisis. If the Walt Disney Company hopes to keep its customers paying \$75 a pop to be entertained, it has to decide exactly *what* Epcot is, whether it's a site of learning or a theme park, and stick with the designation. It will be exciting to see what transpires.

I don't have all the answers. I hope only to provide a different way of seeing our culture. Just because we consider something of "low" culture doesn't mean it shouldn't merit analysis. Frito Pie and Epcot are important because they're common. Nostalgia is important because it is deeply sentimental. Kitsch is important because it satisfies a very American need for speed, efficiency, reduction and simplicity. We have a lot to learn from the bad as well as the good.

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## II. A Theory of American Kitsch

When I tell people about my work on kitsch, they generally deliver one of two responses. Those older than about 25 years old ask me what makes kitsch specifically American or not. Those under 25 ask, “What is kitsch?” The answers to both questions are not simple, even when turning to the dictionary for help.

Webster’s Dictionary defines kitsch as “Something that appeals to popular or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality” (“Kitsch”). This is a generalizing definition, reaching farther than the scope of poor art to all cultural items and artifacts. In contrast, the Oxford English Dictionary defines kitsch as “Art characterized by worthless pretentiousness; the qualities associated with such art or artifacts” (“Kitsch”). The decidedly British perspective on kitsch limits its discussion to art, personifying it as having “judgmental” qualities. The difference in the two definitions is highly cultural—the European definition offers a certain “pretentiousness” or worthless value of its own by reducing kitsch to art. The Webster’s definition, in its generality, takes a holistic approach, suggesting that kitsch can be found in anything of popular taste. These editorial differences alone indicate a tension between views of kitsch limited to art, versus those extending over anything embodying aesthetic characteristics. In the literature on kitsch, the Webster’s definition is generally embraced; however, the major theorists tackling this topic tend to limit their examples to works of art.

There are two main schools of thought in the kitsch definition debate. The first is a class-based definition presented by Clement Greenberg in the 1934 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” The second is the a-historical, aesthetic (and dare I say, mechanical) view of kitsch supported by

Tomas Kulka's text, Kitsch and Art. Both schools argue for the importance and application of kitsch to culture; however, the implication of class on the development of culture is at the heart of the division between the two schools. Consequently, the role of class in development of culture is worthy of deep introspection and debate. In this text, however, arguments are presented not for understanding the role of class in cultural development, but only for the development of kitsch. What role does class play or not play in understanding American kitsch?

Kitsch is produced for the "mass culture," a designation with subtle elitist connotations in comparison to the "high culture." The few works devoted to the study of kitsch supports the influence of class on the growth, perception and appropriateness on its spread through cultures. The seminal text of this definition is Greenberg's essay which, as followed by the theories of Gillo Dorfles, Hermann Broch, Dwight McDonald and Pierre Bordieu, gives insight into the affective-via-class nature of kitsch.

The essay begins with an initial weighty discussion about the avant-garde, following by his judgment claims regarding the worth of kitsch. He frequently insinuates its repugnancy when compared to the avant-garde, calling it the "rear guard." His prerequisite for kitsch is "a fully matured cultural tradition" (10). The benchmark culture on which the basis for kitsch is placed is certainly not a culture for the middle and lower classes; more fluid cultures than that of the high culture establishment. A fully matured culture is one that has stasis. So, appropriately, Greenberg is really suggesting that the precondition for kitsch is a "high culture," without explicitly saying it is. He continually subverts the judgment of those that embrace kitsch within his essay.

Certainly, Thorstein Veblen's investigation of the upper class in The Theory of the Leisure Class implicitly identifies Greenberg's culture, necessarily preconditioned. One can



make several conclusions about the common perception of kitsch from his text. The use of beautiful objects, according to Veblen, "...is, commonly, gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty. [It is] appreciation of its superior honorific character, much more frequently than it is an unsophisticated appreciation of its beauty" (162-163). Kitsch is associated with the debased because it imitates beauty. A jewel-encrusted spoon is not kitsch, because it does have a high value and therefore, a high inherent beauty according to Veblen, but a spoon encrusted with fake jewels or made to look expensive *is* kitsch, because it pretends to be beautiful<sup>1</sup>. Kitsch, therefore, becomes the inferior, dishonored opposite of whatever it means to copy.

Veblen also argues that valued objects are highly prized because of their exclusivity. They grant both "the possessors sense of pecuniary superiority" by their ability to be monopolized. Members of the upper-class have the monopoly on all objects of wealth, and therefore, all objects of beauty. Kitsch is anti-monopoly; it can be reproduced and copied over and over again for anyone to have, regardless of wealth or status. A spoon from the Franklin Mint collection gratifies neither the economic nor the aesthetic superiority one lauds over another when possessing an item of great worth. This is an important designation to make in considering the evolution of American kitsch culture. Kitsch becomes a perversion of the equal opportunity for wealth and status that has often been cited as the strongpoint of American society. No matter who you are or where you're from, you can have your very own rags to riches story.

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<sup>1</sup> Veblen doesn't refer to kitsch by name, but certainly we would not fail to characterize his bejeweled spoon as kitsch, nor would we fail to see that the substance of his argument applies to the study of kitsch.

Does the imitative and repetitive nature of kitsch devalue it? Greenberg suggests it does. He writes, "Nor is every single item of kitsch altogether worthless. Now and then it produces something of merit, something that has an authentic folk flavor; and these accidental and isolated instances have fooled people who should know better" (11). To whom does he direct his sarcasm? He isn't referring to the people that embrace both folk art and kitsch, because they would hardly recognize the difference—if they knew better, they would know kitsch when they saw it. He openly criticizes the ineffectiveness of upper-class art critics to do their jobs. "Folk art" is an elitist term inherently for art common to the lower classes, but coupled with the imagery of thoroughly confused art critics, one can do nothing but to envision kitsch as a product of the lower classes, necessarily abhorred by those who have the ability to assess cultural tastes.

Kulka stands apart as the figurehead of the anti-historical perspective of kitsch. While many kitsch scholars would agree with many of his basic claims about its nature, most focus determinedly on the involvement of class structures in the kitsch debate. Kulka's definition limits kitsch to specified, narrowly established contentions, identifying it as an aesthetics problem, as art that cannot be qualified as good or bad. Yet placing kitsch outside the realm of class and away from the common people to which it truly belongs is to miss, perhaps, the point of kitsch. Does it need to be easily recognized emotionally and thematically because the lower classes don't have time to devote to "thinking" art?

Generally, Kulka's argument centers on a transcendent definition, not positioning kitsch on the high or low end of a taste spectrum, but claiming that it stands outside of aesthetics altogether. This is a valid, but incomplete definition of kitsch; by ignoring the historical and cultural impacts, his definition is incomplete, and his understanding limited. Kulka's definition hinges on three major characteristics: "Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged

with stock emotions. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes” (37-38). Though his basic definition concedes Greenberg's claim that "Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations" (10), he is too reductive, easily compartmentalizing kitsch into categories that reflect the seriousness of its imitation. The third condition, specifically, imbues pragmatism into the anti-kitsch, or art. It is art that “enriches associations,” making the objects and themes more lucid. Most kitsch items, however, don’t have as serious an agenda. Hello Kitty and garden gnomes, for example, were not created to imitate real life or to contribute to the degradation of the themes they supposedly invoke. They exist for fun, entertaining their consumers.

Kulka underestimates greatly the cultural-dependence on kitsch, referring to it only in a few paragraphs of the conclusion of the first chapter. He argues for the flexibility of his definition, "since the culture-dependent and time-dependent factors that may influence these differences are already built into our three conditions" (39). His definition is certainly unspecific enough to permit various cultural interpretations, but it trivializes the mass culture implications that are at the heart of most other kitsch scholars. Culture is defined not only by its products and its values, but also, and perhaps more importantly by those who determine those values. Kulka's final claim about cultural relativity, therefore, is incorrect. "The cultural dependence of kitsch thus does not invalidate our definition; indeed, the existing differences in the identification of kitsch may actually be explained by its conditions. They may help us understand why people disagree about kitsch and point out what it is they are actually disagreeing about” (41). People of the same culture disagree about kitsch all the time, though the values expressed are

understandable to both parties. Imitative kitsch is generally seen as kitsch to lower classes more than the upper classes, for they can afford to have or see what is being imitated.

The difference between the two schools can immediately be seen when comparing the rhetoric of each. Greenberg uses emotionally charged language to describe kitsch and its effects. Kitsch is for those who "are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide." Kitsch is anthropomorphized in Greenberg's description, like its Godzilla coming to squash high-culture. "Kitsch is deceptive," "its own salesman" (11), "kitsch pretends to demand nothing," "kitsch...has erased this distinction" (10). Kulka's definition, on the other hand, ironically lacks reference to the high emotion of kitsch in and of itself. This definition is highly academic, and the wording is somewhat boring. We get, essentially, a dictionary definition. Greenberg's definition certainly carries the spirit of kitsch better than Kulka's.

But, Kulka concedes, the spirit is inconsequential—objective classification is the point. "...The suggested definition is a classificatory one. Its task is to provide an answer to the question of what kinds of objects are correctly classified as kitsch....it is not the task of this definition to answer all the questions that can arise..." (41). He tells us simply what it is, and what it isn't, but doesn't get at kitsch's true heart in his language. The rhetoric in this case reveals in part, the tension between the two, between Kulka's objectivity and Greenberg's emotionality. Yet what Kulka lacks completely is the class discussion that is at the heart of Greenberg and Veblen's text. It is the class structures that identify the objects and themes to be imitated. For us to identify kitsch, we must have some kind of framework in which to base our conception of "stock emotion" and to recognize objects and themes as "effortlessly identifiable." To an American, a garden gnome does not enrich our associations to gardens, or fantasies. We know its purpose is to be purposeless. Those who are unfamiliar with the garden gnome have no chance of

identifying any kind of stock emotion, have no way of knowing that this thing isn't supposed to "enrich our associations" relating to gardening. But why is the garden gnome kitsch? Greenberg and Veblen would say gardens are a mark of the upper class, of those who have the leisure time appropriate to plant them and tend them (or can afford to have someone else do it for them). Garden gnomes have nothing new to say about gardening, but because we identify them with gardens, they are items of pecuniary taste. Is it possible, however, that just as garden gnomes serve no practical purpose, they also have no thoughtful academic application? Certainly all artifacts of culture carry an analytical weight, but there is no necessary automatic association to class. When is a garden gnome *just* a garden gnome? They always have relevance, but to what and how are debatable. Kitsch may not enrich our associations, but scholars suggest we must make a connection between kitsch and that which is being imitated, that which is considered valued, and therefore, who does the valuing.

To appropriately define American kitsch, I combine ideas from both schools of thought, because alone, they are incomplete. Kulka's a-historical definition and the concept of nostalgia are in every way incompatible. Imitative kitsch—the Mona Lisa on a plate, the Last Supper t-shirt—these are obvious kitsch items depending on consumers who value the imitation of art as much as they do the real thing, because if you put money down for it, then it has some kind of value. A lack of enrichment or understanding presupposes existence. The Mona Lisa is one of the most important works of the Renaissance; consequentially once profiteers slapped the image on a plate, it instantly became kitsch. If it were just any random painting on a plate, however, it wouldn't necessarily be kitsch. The preexisting cultural value of the work had to have happened in the past for kitsch to lampoon it in its current form.

Greenberg's approach to kitsch analysis is incomplete because it is too reductive, limiting the discussion and problems of kitsch to its class issues. American kitsch can't necessarily be reduced to class because the delineations between who belongs to upper and lower classes are not greatly acknowledged as is the case in other Western societies. Despite this ambiguity, the perception of belonging to the lower class is still negative. Though Americans outwardly reject the hegemonic institution of the upper class by supporting moves to strengthen the middle and lower classes, they will overspend and go into debt at any cost to avoid being labeled as low-class themselves, as the low class still holds a negative distinction (ex. white trash, Hoosier, and many more derogatory terms). Unquestionably, the expression of class is different in Europe, as they typically follow traditional class expectations and distinctions. What they buy, where they live, how they behave are generally realistic manifestations of their actual personal wealth.

Ironically, American kitsch is revered and even beloved by many, regardless of income, for the ersatz value within its appeal to history and emotion. In fact, to experience first-hand beloved examples of American kitsch, such as Epcot Center, Mount Rushmore, and even the Santa Fe Frito Pie, the consumer must be prepared to spend a significant amount of money. These items, significantly, are high-value items of kitsch. Additionally, within the last decade or so, retro-kitsch items have come into popularity. Fashion, architecture, film, television and art all reveal a resurgence of interest in cheap tastelessness for the sake of irony. Essentially, the thought that "kitsch is so good *because* it's bad" undermines Greenberg's strict division of the upper-class versus the lower class (that began, more or less, with Andy Warhol.) Class is still important for the definition of kitsch, its categorization as "cheap," but it is no longer reserved for any one group.

Kitsch is difficult to define not only because of the conflict regarding the involvement of class or aestheticism, but also because of its consequence. Kitsch is culturally relevant, paradoxically changing with the times while retaining the same intentional feelings and contorted perceptions. This importance makes it all but impossible to make a firm definition of what American kitsch is.

America is a nation in flux, constantly changing and revising its cultural norms and standards to a much larger extent in comparison to many European countries. It would be thoroughly incomplete to reduce American culture to a single category or paradigm; equally, it is impossible for Greenberg and Kulka to assert that kitsch is based primarily on class or aesthetics when it is plainly about both, to a certain extent<sup>2</sup>. Generally, culture is defined by its tensions, the blend of outside cultures and traditions into a singular identifiable tradition. The American problem of culture is essentially a Postcolonial problem, an issue for many in first-world countries who want to incorporate their old cultural values with a blend of new ones. Consequently, debate and conflict arise. What is or should be left behind? Retained? The answers vary based on any given standards of culture.

What makes American kitsch “kitsch” is the focus of the historical debate on nostalgia, the longing for a past time. At one time, the word nostalgia was synonymous with the word “homesickness,” until its current definition as longing for a past *time* took precedence in the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to suggest that this definition of “American kitsch” is exclusive of other developed cultures in which kitsch is readily processed and manufactured. While the research reveals a difference between the American kitsch and the kitsch of many developed societies, this definition could be applicable in those instances. What is clear, however, is that nostalgia is a driving force behind American culture more definitively and succinctly than it is in any other culture worldwide. A definition of kitsch rooted in nostalgia, therefore, is most appropriate to American culture, though also applicable to others.

Century.<sup>3</sup> Nostalgia often takes on bittersweet connotations because of its inherent sense of loss. Peter Fritzsche argues, “Nostalgia not only cherishes the past for the distinctive qualities that are no longer present but also acknowledges the permanence of their absence” (1592). Kitsch rooted in nostalgia, therefore, is the simulated re-creation of history, meant to invoke the same sentiments with a conscious knowledge that the previous authentic history can never be fully recreated. “A diminished outlook, it is based on repetition rather than novelty, order rather than juxtaposition” (1592). Though Fritzsche never mentions kitsch explicitly, the use of the word “repetition” in conjunction with unattainable history identifies nostalgia *as* kitsch. History is imitated consciously. Fritzsche’s conditions for nostalgia are also the preconditions for American kitsch: “Nostalgia requires both a discursive field in which discontinuity is given particular historical form *and* the material evidence of disruption in order to give historical forms the poignancy that allows them to be recognized over time and space” (1617). Essentially, both a historical narrative and its “material evidence,” in the form of common experience, must exist for nostalgia to be personally significant.

Without the large and small scale conditions of simulated historical experience, nostalgia becomes inconsequential. American kitsch requires the same *presumed* common historical narrative resulting in different cultural experiences. The nostalgias are different; they’re still competing with one another over a shared historical event, place or occurrence. It is shared cultural perspectives, however, that transform the historical event, rendering it different for each based on their cultures, values or preferences. Kitsch, itself, is rendered from perspectivalism as well. It too must include elements of foul aestheticism and classlessness; however, they are

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<sup>3</sup> Susan J. Matt, “You Can’t Go Home Again: Homesickness and *Nostalgia* in U.S. History”. [Journal of American History](#). 94.2 (2007), 469-497. This article provides an interesting look into the etymology of the word, as well as its historical link with homesickness.



primarily entrenched within the sentimental individualized historic perspective. For kitsch to be American, historical perspectivalism that longs for “a” past, regardless of whether or not it is “the” authentic past must exist.

Tourist attractions have always embraced this kind of imitation through condensation of certain regional characteristics. Epcot Center, for example, presents country pavilions in a World’s Fair style. One can see the nostalgic essence of an entire country and culture simply by wandering through a building, riding a ride or watching a movie. Guests are exposed to the stereotype, a revisionist history ignoring the fall of Communism, establishment of homogenized modern urban areas and other tell-tale markers of mass cultural globalization. Likewise, many cities offer gift shops that both reflect the need for kitsch to be both low-class and reducibly representational of a city or attraction. Many historically-oriented cities constantly try to remake their image in order to cater to more sophisticated tourists in order to reject the cheap tourist paradigm. Downtown Santa Fe caters largely to high-class, sophisticated tourists. In both venues, nostalgia is carefully crafted and manufactured.

The intentional manipulation is what makes it kitsch. The simulation, however, is what makes it American. Milan Kundera defines kitsch in his novel, The Unbearable Lightness of Being as highly emotional: “Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: *How nice to see children running on the grass!* The second tear says: *How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!* It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch” (251). American kitsch embraces the same self-consciously, assertively communal affectations; however, it is the *longing* for the communal moment, rather than the moment itself, that identifies American kitsch apart from all others.

### III. Frito Pie—The Nostalgic Kitsch Artifact



**Figure 1. Theresa Hernandez, creator of the Frito Pie, welcomes customers into the Five-and-Dime General Store<sup>4</sup>.**

Santa Fe, New Mexico is considered an artist's haven. Throughout the city, silversmiths, weavers, metal fabricators and other artists establish studios and galleries in which to practice and sell their craft. Many pieces reflect the Southwest culture in which the city is rooted. With the second largest art market in America after New York City, many stores are quick to exhibit a plethora of works. For the tourist who comes to Santa Fe to shop and collect art, the first stop is generally the *Plaza of the Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis*, commonly known as the Plaza. Surrounded by indistinguishable jewelry and art stores, the Plaza is the premier shopping center for the city. On Sundays, Native American artists traditionally show their crafts

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<sup>4</sup> The pictures within this section were taken by Drew Jones and me over two visits to the Five and Dime in 2008 and 2009. I refer to myself in the third-person in my snapshot, and subsequent snapshots, because I think it's hilarious.

and wares in front of the Palace of the Legion of Governors, as tourists stroll by. Vendors in carts stand poised outside of the center's landmarks, selling prints, weavings, and jewelry—anything they craft that seems appealing to tourists wishing to purchase “authentic” Native American wares.

While many galleries in the city exhibit the work of budding artists, there is no question that the Native American wares sold on Sundays in the Plaza, as well as the rest of the art pieces from the stores surrounding the plaza are souvenirs. Danielle Lasusa makes the distinction by identifying souvenirs as “art created specifically *for* tourists. Most people are hesitant to call them ‘art objects’ because we believe that they are cheap, mass-produced, and crudely made, and they often are” (274). While much of the art featured on the Plaza isn’t necessarily cheap (running anywhere from five to five-hundred dollars or more for a necklace), both the major stores and vendors, as well as the Native American artists mass produce their items to satiate what Lasusa would consider “the need to fulfill the role of tourist—to have the items to display to others and to remember the place in which it was purchased” (278). Clearly, the artists in Santa Fe understand the tourist market in their city. According to the New Mexico Department of Tourism, visitors to New Mexico have a larger average annual income than the national average for travelers. In fact, it is worth noting that the tourist market in New Mexico is quite narrowed. The primary reason for visiting New Mexico is to visit family or friends. Most tourists are American, and most arrive by car. (Tourism Fact Sheet). Nationally, New Mexico is in the bottom tier of overseas visitors, welcoming only .5% of all foreign visitors, over half of those originating from Canada (International MasterCard Usage in New Mexico). Given that most travelers arrive by car, meaning their originating cities are close-by, and they have family and friends in which they see, it can be inferred that travelers generally have a pre-existing

familiarity with New Mexico. Santa Fe, then, is an extremely specific tourist destination, catering mostly to art collectors and admirers. This may indicate why overall tourist spending in New Mexico is higher, with an average of \$408 per trip as compared to the national average of \$353 (Tourism Fact Sheet).

Certainly, a weighty discussion of kitsch could be engaged regarding just the popular mass-produced art items featured in the Plaza. The overpriced art, turquoise jewelry and woodcut Santos exemplify traditional kitsch, sharing in part, both characteristics of Greenberg and Kulka, insofar as they obscure worthlessness by imitation of value. The items in the Plaza boutiques include bronze statues, Southwest jewelry and artwork, artisan rugs, and other artisan crafted objects. These items, so decidedly Southwest in their aesthetic, are an example of the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy tourist, whether displayed in the home or on the body. Silver and turquoise jewelry, for example, is so evidently Southwest, that by virtue of its very display, its authenticity is "evident", one can see that the wearer has "been there, done that". Ironically, the true evidence of kitsch in this case, is that close inspection of these items often yields "Made in China" or "Made in Mexico" labels from items that seem to be locally crafted.

Though most of the tourist shops on the Plaza carry these items of "unintentional" kitsch masquerading as valuable art items, there is a store on the Plaza that supplies intentionally kitsch souvenirs and trinkets. This store invokes competing nostalgia by contrasting sentiment for the Southwest rustic style and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century drug store culture. For a Santa Fe tourist like

myself, the Santa Fe Five and Dime General Store<sup>5</sup> appears unabashedly and shamelessly kitsch in the spirit of historian Maxine Feifer's concept of the "post-tourist"<sup>6</sup>.

For those that own the store, however, it is a stronghold against total tourist takeover of the downtown. The Five and Dime's revival allows locals to claim part of downtown as their own, rather than allow it to remain a tourist trap, a la Bourbon Street or Times Square. This was the goal at its inception. The Five and Dime recalls the nostalgia of old general stores in the vein of its predecessor, Woolworths. From its very beginning, the store has attempted to capture the same ambience (if band-aids and Mexican blankets offer an ambience) as its predecessor by offering cheap, general products in an effort to retain its identity with locals. By carrying the bare essentials, though only in travel size, as well as cheap souvenirs and items, the store is meant to encourage business from locals. The transformation from Woolworth's to Five and Dime, according to the corporate website, attempts to capture these sentiments through the story of its acquisition.

Earl and Deborah Potter, a local married couple, were saddened to learn in 1997 that the Woolworth's stores across the country were closing. Determined, they met with the manager of the store, Mike Collins, to find out if they could somehow "save" the Woolworth's, as it was "the only locals serving store left on the Plaza." Mr. Collins informed the couple that he was planning to move the best-sellers into a third of the existing space of the store, which was currently owned by Winifred Braden, a little old lady living in Arizona. Despite being assailed with offers from

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<sup>5</sup> Typically, "Five-and-Dimes" were the early predecessor to contemporary dollar stores. The Five-and-Dime subject to analysis here is the corporation's actual name for the store and its franchises in Branson Missouri, San Antonio Texas, and in Santa Fe. I will only use the term Five-and-Dime as the name of the store, not of the type of store.

<sup>6</sup> This concept is defined in the *Forum* article as the tourist that recognizes that he or she needs to fulfill the stereotypical roles and actions of the tourist, by visiting popular places, being in group situations and purchasing novelties of a tourist, or kitsch, nature. It is an ironic way to travel for most tourists who desperately don't want to appear as such.

art galleries trying to purchase the space, Mrs. Braden allowed the Potters to plead their case for the continuation of a discount store in the existing space. The Potters brought their children and dog to convince her, and she subsequently let the Potters purchase the space from her to start the Five-and-Dime General Store. In a clichéd conclusion, the website reveals that “years later, [the Potters] learned she didn’t like dogs.” Mrs. Braden consented to allowing the partners to pay below-market rent, and a 35-year lease for the store (Quick).

The appearance of the store complicates the argument that it is a store catering to the general public. Unlike the rest of the shops and restaurants that line the Plaza, with their low ceilings, ambient lighting and floor-to-ceiling fixtures, the Five-and Dime is located in a high ceilinged industrial building with excessively bright fluorescent lighting. The front few shelves of the store are devoted to drug-store essentials like toothpaste, deodorant, greeting cards, Tylenol, and the like. The diminutive product line indicates that sundries are obviously not the main focus of retail, dwarfed by the remainder of novelties and souvenirs stacked on metal shelves halfway up the wall. Immediately to the left of the entrance is an 8’ high rack of postcards, followed by colorful magnets bearing “Santa Fe” or “New Mexico, Land of Enchantment!” One must peer over several shelves to see the back of the store—desperately long for how small the storefront actually is. Along the sides of the walls and in the remaining shelves of the store, however, are hundreds of different souvenirs, toys, novelty items, clothing items and food items.

All are branded either with the city or state name, stereotypical representations of the Southwest, or, in some cases, have nothing to do with the city or the Southwest at all. Many items, like the Davy Crockett coon-skin caps, model John Deere tractors, and whoopee cushions are distributed throughout the store, clashing madly with Route 66 ash trays and giant bejeweled

sombreros. These items remain because they are profitable, ignoring the Southwest aesthetic for items that evoke a general sense of nostalgia and pastimes, items popular for Five-and-Dimes without care for their surroundings.



**Figure 2. One of the keychain and shot glass displays in the store. They are generally grouped by items bearing the same words. This is the "Santa Fe" shelf. The "Route 66" shelf is around the left corner.**

Despite the varied and eclectic retail, the store is famously known as the birthplace of the Frito Pie, arguably one of the only draws for locals because of its folklore and tradition. The true origins of the Frito Pie are hotly contested. Many sources claim that Frito Pie was invented in 1932 by Daisy Doolin, the mother of the man who invented Fritos after purchasing the recipe from a Mexican café. Regional differences in chili preferences, such as the “true” Texas chili made without beans, factor into the debate regarding the origins of the dish.<sup>7</sup> Teresa Hernandez, however, was probably the first to mass produce an “in-bag” style of serving Frito Pie. In 1962, she allegedly invented the Frito Pie at the Woolworth’s by slicing a small Fritos corn chips bag sideways, dumping in a scoop of chili and garnishing the top with a handful of shredded cheddar

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see < [http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/fea/taste/stories/DN-nf\\_fritohistory\\_0613liv.State.Edition1.3370c.html](http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/fea/taste/stories/DN-nf_fritohistory_0613liv.State.Edition1.3370c.html)>.



cheese. Frito Pie quickly became one of Woolworth's best sellers as locals would come to the lunch counter to enjoy a meal that was both highly filling and relatively inexpensive. As more tourist-oriented boutiques moved into the downtown area, Woolworth's slowly became the sole holdout against the transformation of the Plaza. Locals, especially employees of the surrounding shops and restaurants, had only one place they could go to enjoy a decently priced meal downtown or purchase necessary toiletries during the day. The Frito Pie quickly became the antithesis of the tourist culture. Today, instead of plunking down 18-20 dollars for a lunch entrée at some of the area's more prolific restaurants, locals pay \$4.35 for a meal that will render the stomach bulging. The Frito Pie has even garnered national attention. It was the subject of a *Gourmet Magazine* article, a spot on NPR's *The Splendid Table* and appeared in several Santa Fe dining guides as the perfect place for a "satisfying snack." As New York Times columnist Matt Gross describes it, "[The Frito Pie] is something like three pounds of meaty, beany, salty, corny goodness" (Gross).

There's an ironic hint of excess in this statement. Certainly three pounds of food (an only slight exaggeration of its weight) constitutes more than a snack. Like many comfort foods it's extremely filling, "sticking to the bones" for quite a long while. It's quite deceptive—small Frito bags typically yield small amounts of chips, and the excess room leaves plenty of space for huge amounts of chili. As a result, what should seem like a snack turns into a "gut-bomb," overstuffing and satisfying. For locals, it's an overly satisfying and economical lunch for fewer than five bucks. For tourists, however, the Frito Pie is a novelty item, an experience to be conquered.





**Figure 3. The author conquering her Frito Pie.**

In all the newspaper articles and features about the Frito Pie, not much is said specifically about its taste—probably for good reason. When I tried the Frito Pie for the first time, I was really expecting something spectacular. The smell of the store should have tipped me off— it had a musty smell, coupled with a slight hint of chilies in the front, and a “hot” Sterno-like smell in the back, like that of hot dogs sitting in water. I expected the chili to be of a traditional, meaty, store-bought variety like Stagg brand, but what I got was a flat, orange-brown mess of ingredients with beans dispersed throughout. The meat had seemingly melted into the soup. Worst of all, the whole meal tasted faintly of ketchup, which as any true chili lover can attest to, is heresy. Multiply by three pounds, and the Frito Pie becomes, as I discovered, an unsatisfying regret. Not surprisingly, the newspaper articles listed on the Five-and-Dime website make no mention of how it tastes. One man quoted in a 1997 Albuquerque Journal article states, “I think [Frito Pie is] a wonderful thing...it’s a good thing they’re doing something for people here who don’t have much money” (Pugh). In this instance, this man’s comments typify the economic allure of the store and food to the locals.

Part of the Frito Pie's allure is rooted in Binkley's conception of kitsch as an "everyday" item. He argues that kitsch is truly "[rooted] in the modest cadence of daily life...[advancing] the repetitive, the secure and comfortable (135). Tourists often place a high value on the restaurants, theatres, shops and other things valued by the people who live in the area they visit. If the locals adopt it as part of their lives, then surely it must be a great place to eat and shop, whether it actually is or not. It seems like a tourist's commandment that locals are automatically considered to be incredible judges of restaurants and shops as they have the knowledge of all choices available throughout the city. Frito Pie is an ironic food item; attractive not *because* it is known only to locals, but because it *seems* unknown. Physically, this is true for the lunch counter. Despite a very small sign in the front of the store identifying it as the home of the Frito Pie, there is no other external indication of its legendary status among residents of Santa Fe. Once inside, it is necessary to wind in and out of a myriad of postcard stands and retail shelves to make it to the lunch counter at the very back of the store. The orientation of the counter makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for tourists to stumble upon it unlike many of the other prolific restaurants downtown. The Frito Pie consumer knows exactly what he or she is looking for and where to find it; therefore, tourists who indulge in Frito Pie are among those who have gone the extra mile in their research about Santa Fe, including that of its kitsch culture.

Certainly in comparison with the upscale boutiques along the Plaza, the Five and Dime with its three-dollar shot glasses and seventy-five cent necklaces lends credence to Greenberg's class-based conception of kitsch, especially in regard to its Southwest items. For those who can afford it, the Plaza offers a myriad of stores with semi-precious stones and metals, carefully crafted; but, for those that cannot, the Five-and-Dime offers strings of beads and semi-precious stones, on sale for 2.99. This class argument, however, makes one concession that the general

managers and storeowners will not—that it is a store specifically for tourists. Certainly, it is, at least in part. But if the store was solely meant for tourist business, it would have closed its doors permanently ten years ago, for it has no endearing qualities save the Frito Pie. Greenberg writes, “It is not enough today...to have an inclination toward [genuine culture]; one must have a true passion for it that will give him the power to resist the faked article that surrounds and presses in on him...” (11). The store doesn’t fit the Greenberg paradigm because the locals embrace the store as a traditional five-and-dime, essential to the character of a small-town center. The items in the store that embrace a more “general” nostalgia, the John Deere tractors and Coke barstools exemplify a generic sense of Americana. Greenberg’s conception of kitsch is only viable when the store, its goods and its foods are placed in the context of Southwest culture. When the store is placed in context with the other stores that sell wares reflecting the Southwest Old-Santa Fe culture, then it is kitsch. To locals, this simulation of the Southwest is not the focal point of the store’s existence and utility.

So what, then, is so essential about the existence of the Five and Dime to locals? Is it the retention of a "general store", a store catering to both tourists and locals? Is it the retention of the Woolworth's atmosphere for many that have lived in the area with the store? From what we can garner from the NPR story, as well as from featured news publications like *The New York Times*, the retention of the Santa Fe Frito Pie is a huge part of it, as it reveals a significant part of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Santa Fe history, challenging Kulka’s anti-historical conception of kitsch.

The very question of history places the kitsch of the Five-and-Dime outside of the conventional discourse on kitsch and into the realm of American kitsch. The Five-and-Dime is quintessentially American kitsch, in part, for the reason that it was given to the Potters, not to profit, but rather, for a moral imperative. With some of the best “prime territory” in Santa Fe for

a gallery or store, Mrs. Braden could have made a fortune selling her store to prospective artists and curators. She sold the store to the Potters, instead, because she believed in their concepts, their retention of a perceived oasis from tourists, the nostalgia of the old Plaza which had been, since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the center of town for everyone, not just its visitors. In an interview with NPR, given just before the Five-and-Dime opened, Mr. Collins said, “[The investors] were more concerned with continuing the tradition of the Woolworths on the Plaza and secondly, to continue the employment of most of the associates that worked for Woolworth’s” (Witowsky). The word “tradition” is confounding. Tradition is more readily seen across the street at the Palace of the Legion of Governors, as Native American artisans peddle their wares. Certainly that’s a tradition that has carried on since the arrival of Spanish settlers. As a 67 year old store in a 400 year old city, the word “tradition” becomes shockingly relative. The store simultaneously reaches for nostalgias of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century American small-town life, and of Spanish Colonial historicism. The store itself serves as the “discursive field” of which competing nostalgia must have, with the shops items; significantly, its Frito Pie, serving as the commonly revered item of kitsch.

The issue of competing nostalgias is certainly not reserved to the Plaza. The city of Santa Fe has attempted in the past century to retain the Southwest aesthetic through the massive redevelopment of old buildings and newly constructed buildings in a Southwest adobe architecture. An article in *The Public Historian* entitled, “The City Different? Historic Preservation and the Santa Fe Plaza” provides insight into the history of the redevelopment of the city; specifically, in the redevelopment of the Plaza since 1912 as part of “The City Beautiful” movement. Since the inception of the movement there have been various *General Plans* developed to guide the development of the city, with the most recent revision in 2004. This

plan, which calls for the identification and preservation of historic districts throughout the city, highlights this tension:

The *General Plan* recognizes the downtown as the “centerpiece and showcase” of the city, with its centuries old Plaza...It also understands that the downtown is a “magnet” for people, especially tourists, from all over the world, with its small-town atmosphere and powerful sense of place. The tourist economy...is driving the Santa Fe Plaza, creating tension between, as the *General Plan* acknowledges, “those who wish to preserve [the downtown] and those who see economic opportunity in new development...” (McWatters 89).

The Five-and-Dime straddles the line between preservation and development. By preserving the Frito Pie, it lends credence to its “historicism”, though irrelevant to the history of the Plaza. The 35-year lease on the property ensures the retention of the “small-town atmosphere and powerful sense of place” that the Five-and-Dime reflects as a holdover from the glory days of drugstores and soda fountains. Like the Plaza itself, the Woolworth’s was a gathering center for many people, young and old. In trying to retain the ambiance, the nostalgia of those times, the Five-and-Dime becomes kitsch. With the advance of dynamic commercial centers, technologies, cultural trends, urban sprawl and suburbanization, and the bankruptcy of the F.W. Woolworth Corporation, the drugstore as gathering place is relatively obsolete. In lacking a signature menu item, especially one with a nostalgic attachment, this it is evident that the Frito Pie is what keeps the lunch counter relevant in Santa Fe.

Following Fritzsche's preconditions for nostalgia, the Five-and-Dime serves as the common "historical narrative" or "historical object." For locals, the Five-and-Dime is a stalwart of the Plaza, the Frito Pie a physical manifestation of longing.

The identification of the store as a site for locals to gather has remained despite a radical change in the items the store carries. As mentioned previously, most of the items in the store are cheaply produced souvenirs, with the sundries and common items clustered in the front. The Potters, in many interviews, have been quite vocal about the selection of their products, keeping only those that sell. Bob Quick writes, "Collins said he 'zeroed in on' the items that sold the best in the old Woolworth's in deciding what merchandise to carry in the Five-and-Dime...In the old store, we generated 70% of our revenue with 30% of our items" (Quick). The items in the store are the bestsellers, revealing that though the character and spirit of the store may belong to the locals, to the Frito Pie aficionados, the business belongs to tourists.

What the locals value about the Five-and-Dime is not, in all certitude, its Frito Pies, or the selection of items at the store, for the non-souvenir items can be had cheaply at just about any gas station or Wal-Mart. The locals value the *idea* of the store instead. It puts people at ease to know that there is one last inexpensive shop on the Plaza, even though they may or may not shop and eat there themselves. To a certain degree, there is comfort, knowing that a meal can be had for only four bucks, even if that meal warrants days of indigestion. The store doesn't create any new identity for the Plaza, for its perceptions are so deeply rooted in the past. The purpose and identity of what the Plaza has meant to Santa Fe residents for hundreds of years has consistently changed; however, as long as the Five-and-Dime still has a place on it, it can only be a site of nostalgia, of the quaintness that a small downtown once had. There is no forward thinking, no progressive movement. Kitsch is not progressive; it instead revels in simulating and re-creating

what preceded it. There isn't anything else expected of the Five-and-Dime, for any change would completely ruin the character of the store.

The Five-and-Dime, therefore, is the antithesis of the progressivism outlined by the developers in the General Plan. These developers share a sense of nostalgia, but one that longs for a future, a time not yet in existence. Progressivism is particularly marked by that forward-looking longing, envisioning the future as better than anything else that precedes it. The Frito Pie stands in the way of any progressivism that can be achieved at the Plaza.

#### IV. Epcot Center—Kitsch Experience



**Figure 1: The author and her sister in front of Spaceship Earth, 2003. Spaceship Earth is adorned with the Mickey Fantasia hand and wand, left over from the 2000 Millennium Celebration. The sphere was returned to its original form in 2007<sup>8</sup>.**

Epcot is one of the most significant sites of kitsch in the United States for its ability to meticulously recreate significant human experiences and vital cultures, all within 300 acres. More impressive, however, is the ability for Epcot to remain a significant center of kitsch despite its ever-changing identity. From the time Walt Disney conceived of an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow in which the problems of urbanization could be prevented, to its current existence as a multi-million dollar theme park, Epcot never ceases to focus on *simulation*.

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<sup>8</sup> All pictures in this chapter were taken by my dad, John Shields. All poses in this chapter were invented by me.



What makes it American kitsch, however, is the particular way in which it manipulates not only nostalgias and reduced histories in World Showcase, but also in the particular way nostalgia for the *future* is represented. Future World was designed to excite and inspire its visitors through glimpses of technologies that would bring about a “better” tomorrow. This nostalgic ideal, rooted in Italian Futurism and New Urbanism, was at the very center of Walt Disney’s original concept for Epcot. The common historical narrative serving as the precondition for nostalgia is the future, the common belief in a world that can be improved through progress and technologies.

Disney uses this to its advantage. Through manipulation of park attractions, revisionist history and careful direction (and misdirection), the company can create a picture of the future that satiates its own objectives as well as that of its corporate sponsors. For much of the park’s history, corporate sponsorship has influenced everything from pavilion placement to ride design and structure, creating a subtle but strong influence within the narratives of each pavilion. The Universe of Energy paints Exxon’s future of energy use and environmentalism. Coca-Cola and American Express, two major U.S.-based companies co-sponsored The American Adventure, a wildly patriotic (and incorrect) portrayal of the significance and importance of the history of the United States. In each of these instances, the attractions reduce the complexities behind energy use and American culture into kitsch portrayals with an agenda. In Epcot, as is the case with many other sites of American kitsch, who dictates and influences the shared cultural narrative is just as important as having one at all.

The Epcot narrative is long and involved. Rather than detailing the entire history of the project, I wish to focus on key examples of kitsch from what I would determine to be the three stages of the project. The first stage, from 1966-1974, reflected Walt Disney’s originally crafted idea of a, working community within the Orlando property. The second stage, from 1975-1996,

reflects the revised identity of Epcot Center as both vacation destination and a hub for technological development and cultural exploration; arguably, the heyday of Epcot's kitsch and competing nostalgia. The third stage, from 1996 to the present, reveals the transformation to Epcot Theme Park, in which the company introduced thrill rides, moving away from not only Walt's original intent, but also the intent of the imaginers and CEO's that initially designed the park. By looking at kitsch in these three stages of the park's history, the extent to which the motives for nostalgia and sentiment have shaped the park become clearly apparent.

#### 1966-1974: Creating Utopia

*"It will never cease to be a living blueprint of the future where people actually live a life they can't find anywhere else in the world." –Walt Disney (Florida Film).*

At the time of his death, Walt Disney was the juggernaut of the entertainment industry. Disney's lifetime accolades, including twenty-six Oscars, reflected his appeal not only to children who loved Mickey Mouse and his other cartoons, but also to adults who appreciated and enjoyed his nature films. Disneyland was created on a similar principle, to allow both kids and adults to have fun and enjoy theme parks together. The park was, of course, wildly popular, allowing Walt to invite millions of people into a world of fantasy. Disneyland is, certainly, kitsch in its own right, rife with nostalgia and condensation of human excitement into delineated spokes, a giant, fantastical castle at its hub. Walt Disney and his company were the creators of kitsch fantasy for a generation of children who would grow up with butchered Hans Christian Anderson fairy tales, small glances into the jungle, and a roller coaster racing through the fiberglass Matterhorn.

Disney's final idea, however, was radically different than anything he had produced in his lifetime. His final televised appearance in October, 1966 detailed plans for the 27,258 acres south of Orlando he secretly purchased during 1965. The film, dubbed "The Florida Film" or "The EPCOT Film" revealed his master plan for the property. In the northwest corner of the property, an "East-Coast Disneyland," known today as the Magic Kingdom, would attract millions of visitors worldwide. Initial plans also included a state-of-the-art airport and massive visitor's center. Standing in front of massive property maps, Disney described his most adventurous idea:

The most exciting, and by far the most important part of our Florida project will be our Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. EPCOT will take its cues from the new ideas and new technologies that are emerging from the creative centers of American industry. It will be a community of tomorrow that will never be completed, but will always be introducing and demonstrating and testing new materials and new systems. And EPCOT will always be a showcase to the world for the ingenuity and imagination of American free enterprise (Florida Film)<sup>9</sup>.

The planned EPCOT community would essentially satisfy three important needs for Disney: establishing a living community that, like Disneyland, would perpetuate a sense of stability through strict control of urban planning and design, maintaining a proving ground for American

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<sup>9</sup> The only available version of the film is located on You Tube. Since the site hosts user-generated content, there is no way to be sure if he actually owns the rights to this film. Though in this case ownership is doubtful, there is no question that the references used to quote the script are illegal. This is a common problem of pop culture research. Though the Internet is wonderful in that it allows older films such as the Florida Film to be displayed to the public, more investigation should be done by the MLA as to the validity of these sources for academic research. With that said, I apologize to the Walt Disney Company for using pirated videos and transcripts to make what could be considered demeaning comments.

innovation, replete with necessary corporate sponsorships to fund the endeavor, and the creation of a tourist attraction in which visitors would be allowed to view the progress created by Disney.

EPCOT would pick up where Walt Disney Productions left off in the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. Walt Disney was involved in the creation of four pavilions, all later converted to attractions in Disneyland and later, Disney World's Magic Kingdom. "At the fair Walt Disney was able to address many of his personal interests and the fields of endeavor in which he wished to guide his company... [The fair] enabled him to build the latest—and most expensive—theme park attractions with the enthusiastic funding of other companies" (Kurtti 16). What Disney wanted, essentially, was a permanent staging ground for new technologies, allowing corporate sponsors to foot the bill for a "captive" testing audience. Instead of placing them in isolated pavilions, Disney wanted to create a city in which these pavilions would exist as part of a vibrant downtown city center.

Urban planning was essential to EPCOT as Walt Disney was extremely concerned with what he deemed "the problems of our cities." The 1960's were a time of civil unrest, manifesting itself particularly in the various race riots in some of the country's largest cities, including Disney's home, Los Angeles, in 1965. Walt had always been preoccupied with image control, calling his Disneyland employees "cast members" and making intentional efforts to obscure anything that would impede on the theatricality of the park in its "backstage" area. Control, management and organization were the solutions to these urban problems, and to have the ultimate control, Disney would have to start anew: "We think the need is for starting from scratch on virgin land and building a special kind of new community" (Florida Film). In starting from scratch, EPCOT becomes kitsch. Had Disney wanted to create a community within an existing city or transform (in a kind of Futurist, progressive gentrification) a city area into his

futuristic dream world, it wouldn't have been so explicitly kitsch because the imitative element would not exist. By building a *new* city however, Disney was able to selectively incorporate good parts of urban areas (convention centers, shopping areas, offices and businesses) in a layout that was attractive and fostered order.

EPCOT's design, in fact, was based on the same orderly, systematic, and rational planning that had been the Disneyland trademark. The community would be designed in a hub-and-spoke design with an urban complex sprawling 50 acres at its center. In the center of the urban area, a massive hotel and convention center would serve as the flagship architectural building. The entire urban center would be enclosed in a glass dome, providing for rigid climate control against the swampy Florida climate. The urban area would be surrounded by three concentric rings, the first consisting of high-density apartments, the second containing the city's parks, churches, schools and community centers, and the third with single-family housing in cul-de-sacs (Koenig 35-36). Transportation would also be tightly monitored. Commuters and tourists would travel in and out of the urban area via monorail or WEDway PeopleMover lines<sup>10</sup>. All car traffic would be diverted on single roads around the perimeter of the domed urban center, or underground—Disney wanted to eliminate cars from EPCOT as much as he could. "I'm not against the automobile, but I just feel that the automobile has moved into communities too much" (qtd. in Mannheim 7). In total, up to 20,000 people would live in EPCOT, renting their properties in order to allow Walt Disney Productions to retain property rights (Mannheim 8).

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<sup>10</sup> The WEDWAY PeopleMover was an attraction in Disneyland, later moved to Disney World that simulated the future of public transportation. Motors turning Goodyear tires were placed 9 feet apart to continuously propel cars around the track as the cars lacked motors. Disney felt this would be the perfect short-distance mode of transportation for EPCOT because the cars would be continuously running, thereby eliminating wait times at stations and increasing efficiency. Interestingly, the model created for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow can still be viewed from the Walt Disney World WEDWAY PeopleMover as part of the attraction.

Walt Disney's EPCOT community was made kitsch, by his insistence that it, like his theme parks, would be a tourist destination. Guests would be able to literally peer into a glass bubble and see what the future would be like—a living, breathing diorama, tightly controlled. The monorails and PeopleMovers would carry commuters and tourists in and out of the residential and urban areas. One Disney advisor approached Walt directly with the problem, saying residents would need to be dressed up at all times to be permanently on exhibit. Mannheim concedes, "EPCOT's goals of being both a showcase and a community dedicated to the needs of residents may not have been compatible" (9). This understatement reveals the extent to which Disney left many issues unresolved, primarily that of linking a living community and a tourist community together. Like his parks, the residents would be simply glorified "cast members," perpetuating the illusion of communal cohesiveness. For the many reasons EPCOT would be an impossible venture as Disney imagined it, this problem specifically delegitimizes it as an authentic solution to "urban problems" and instead makes it a simulated farce of hyper-sentimentality. Mintz writes, "Tourists are seeking more meaningful, even profound satisfaction, but what they actually experience is a 'staged authenticity,' an encounter which is essentially engineered both by the 'industry' that controls the plan of the visit and by the cultural expectations of the visitor" (47). It would be ethically questionable and practically impossible to incorporate a community of people into an intentional tourist attraction.<sup>11</sup> The "cultural expectations" of the visitor would be for EPCOT to foster a site of voyeurism.

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<sup>11</sup> The Amish and Native Americans live, to a certain extent, in communities that have evolved into tourist attractions, and they do manipulate their image to suit the needs of tourism. Yet they are not mandated by anyone to do so, they have done so because it is wildly profitable. Disney made no mention as to whether his residents would be compensated—like the residents of Celebration, they probably would have to pay to live there. While many Native American and Amish artifacts could be considered kitsch, their entire communities would not—unlike EPCOT.

Effectively, EPCOT lay at a precarious divide between nostalgia for the past, and the emotionality behind futuristic nostalgia. On one hand, Walt Disney wanted the living areas to emulate the quaintness of his Missouri hometown that he meticulously tried to recreate on the Main Streets of Disneyland and the Magic Kingdom. Marceline, Missouri was a long way from the race riots of the late 1960's that urged him forward on the EPCOT project. The small town atmosphere condenses movement, limiting residents to a certain few blocks to have most of their essential needs met. Cars, though not in fashion at the time of Disney's boyhood, were totally unnecessary. In fact, his lifelong uneasiness with the automobile culture clearly reflects intent to return to a sense of small-town life, where folks walk and mingle with one another. The flight from small towns to urban and suburban areas was well underway by the 1960's, and Disney wanted his community to incorporate the attractive urban aspects as well, making a skyscraping<sup>12</sup> convention center the focal point of EPCOT. By incorporating both the best elements of city life, and of small town living, Disney's idea fulfilled Binkley's critique of kitsch, turning his repetitive blend of city and small town into "a curious reversal which rehabilitates its failure, its conventionality and its duplicitousness into a sign of its humanity, redeeming its shortcomings by applying them to the maximization of charm" (140). Where Disney would fail to portray truly realistic scenes from either urban or small town living, he would, by turning the community into a tourist attraction, proudly display only the best and greatest facets of both into an unrealistic, synthesized version of living.

Considering EPCOT is often referred to as a pre-cursor to the New Urbanist style of neighborhood planning, it isn't unrealistic that a kitsch living environment could be achieved. Currently, Celebration, the New Urbanist Disney-owned community located on the south end of

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<sup>12</sup> Or bubblescraping, if you will.

the property, combines the small town atmosphere and urban center into a tightly controlled and monitored living environment with Disney's idea of synthesis in mind.

While Disney was, on one hand, striving to recreate an idealized version of the nostalgic easy-going small town environment of yesterday, on the other hand, his preoccupation with a community that would respond quickly to technological changes and be a showcase for "American industry" reflects an emotional longing for the prospects of tomorrow. He wanted tourists to long for nonexistent technologies to improve lives. Disney himself recognized the main problem behind his Futurist<sup>13</sup> philosophy of community: "The only problem with anything 'of tomorrow' is that at the pace we're going right now, tomorrow would catch up with us before we got it built" (qtd. in Kurtti 81). Because items "of tomorrow" are outdated so quickly, anything built with the intent to be futuristic in and of itself must be kitsch. As soon as the item becomes outdated, the sentiment and emotion behind looking forward to the future is immediately replaced by sentiment for what we thought the future was *supposed* to look like.<sup>14</sup>

Walt Disney died before he could take into consideration the implication of a living community on the Disney World property. Consequently, the original idea of the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow died as well. From 1967-1975, EPCOT was all but forgotten about as the Walt Disney Company had to adjust to the absence of its founder and visionary, maintenance and development of the Walt Disney World Resort, and managing its status as a growing Wall Street powerhouse. Instead of risking potential ethical, governmental, and financial issues, the Walt Disney company decided to revise Walt's plan, eliminating the

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<sup>13</sup> Futurism is an art form that upholds the success of human technology over nature. It is an Italian form of art, but is typically applied to anything invoking a nationalistic, proud tone regarding the triumph of the future over the old ways. See Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 1906 article, "Futurist Manifesto."

<sup>14</sup> Steve Jobs is the current master of futuristic nostalgia, making each new presentation of technology an epic event. The iPhone application commercials make anything seem possible. Consequently, the first generation iPod is now kitsch, with its "archaic" lack of click wheel evoking feelings of nostalgia and sentiment for simpler times.



communal living aspect in favor of a theme park that would not only embrace the original kitsch nostalgia of tomorrow, but would also incorporate stereotypical and reduced imitations of the world's countries.

#### 1975-1996: The Rhetoric of Epcot Center

*“...Yet the only people I see who are successful at changing the world are right here [at Epcot Center]—people with very special dreams. We’re here acting out what Albert Schweitzer often spoke of in his philosophies years ago. ‘Set a good example for the world. If you are excellent, if you are of high quality, the world will imitate you.’”*

*– Marty Sklar, Vice President, Creative Development, WED Enterprises (qtd. Beard 21).*

Most of the literature on Epcot Center focuses on the second phase of the concept's existence, from the time it was revised from Disney's original EPCOT idea to the first closures of its original pavilions for thrill ride expansion. The first fifteen years of the park best capture Disney's original idea. Epcot Center consists of two halves—the first half, Future World, reflects Walt Disney's intentions for an inspiring and technologically innovative tourist experience. The second half, World Showcase, hails back to Disney's experience with the World's Fair with eleven different country pavilions, each showcasing its culture through movies, food and attractions.

There is no doubt that Epcot Center is just as kitsch as its predecessors. Every pavilion in each of the park's halves replicates culture and human experience. The attractions are painstakingly detailed, achieving the highest level of ironic authenticity. Each warrants a weighty discussion regarding their kitsch nature; however, I intend to focus on two pavilions in particular—Spaceship Earth in Future World and The American Adventure in World Showcase. Both serve as the “flagship” pavilion for each half of the park, each prominently placed within

the context of the other pavilions. The attractions both rely heavily on a long narrative, captivating audiences for an extended amount of time. The rides also feature heavily imagined and truncated versions of historical events. For these pavilions however, it does not matter so much that their narratives are true; rather, what matters is the conveyed sense of nostalgia each of the projects presents. What makes it American kitsch, however, is that each tries to present a “Disney-fied” version of history, picking and choosing that which links closest to its main argument, rejecting the multiple cultural perspectives its guests would bring to the project. Epcot Center is competing for the same nostalgia found in “God Bless America” bumper stickers and fake marble busts of Aristotle--it offers but one way to falsely envision the America repeatedly falsely envisioned by everyone else.

### *Spaceship Earth*

Spaceship Earth is Epcot’s centerpiece. It is the world’s largest geodesic sphere, 180 feet in height, 164 feet in diameter, weighing in at over 16 million pounds. It is covered in 954 triangular anodized aluminum plates that are self cleaning and divert rain water from within the structure through pipes to the World Showcase lagoon, preventing water from cascading off its sides (Kurtti 91). It is an imposing structure not only for its massive, massive size, but its sterility. Its silver color, mathematically precise roundness coupled with the severe angles of its outer triangular plates conveys the homogenizing nature of futurism. It is anti-culture, condensing all of human culture into one common, unified, colorless image.

The narrative of the ride also condenses the history of communication into one large story, spelled out in audio-animatronic vignettes as the Omnimover cars climb to the top of the

structure. Since Epcot Center's opening on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1982, the ride has had four different narrators, with four different scripts, but the dioramas have, for the most part, remained the same.



**Figure 2: Spaceship Earth, 1994. The author is in the middle, looking away.**

The ride is entered through the bottom of the sphere, as a ramp leads up to the loading platform for the “time machines,” leading guests through communication history. Speakers embedded in the seat headrests blare, cautioning guests to remain seated at all times as they start climbing the hill into the belly of the sphere. Immediately, riders realize why the warnings and then the music are so loud—the Omnimover cars chug up the track with a noticeable mechanical noise even over the sound. A time machine it’s not; suddenly, the ride seems archaic with the

jerked movements of the cars. As we travel through a dimly lit tunnel, we are surrounded by voices and sounds of modern day communication. Our narrator speaks: "Like a grand and miraculous spaceship, our planet has sailed through the universe of time. And for a brief moment, we have been among its many passengers. From the very beginning we have always sought to reach out to one another. To bridge the gaps between us. To communicate" (frikitiki). This script, in use from 1994-2007 (and the only script and narration I have personally heard), is read by British actor, Jeremy Irons. He narrates this first phrase incredibly slowly, drawing out pauses between sentences to allow for deep reflection on the fleeting nature of our humanity. It also gives us time to reflect on our status as meta-passengers, traveling within the simulated Spaceship Earth, this time, at an ironic "break-neck" speed, starting with Cro-Magnon man scrawling on cave walls.

The next vignette shows ancient Egyptians and their hieroglyphs. "With the creation of papyrus scrolls, came the world's first piece of paper. Now, without ever leaving their palaces, pharaohs could deliver proclamations and decrees to subjects across the land" (frikitiki). As we ride by, this bit of history is acknowledged and absorbed, reduced to a single scene of a robotic Egyptian pharaoh, jerkily beckoning his slaves to deliver messages. We are given enough time to acknowledge the importance of paper before moving on to a Greek theatre scene. Like the rest of the vignettes, the Egyptian scene reduces the essence of Egyptian history and its importance to communication down to a couple of immobile robots waving their arms around in kitsch fashion. In Kulka's spirit, it doesn't contribute to our understanding of what paper actually meant to the development of communication, how people learned to use it effectively, and more so, how it spread to the lower classes. The omission of other cultural ties to papermaking reinforces the one-sided narrow view of history. The Chinese, for example consider papermaking as one of its

four great inventions, disputing the Egyptian claims. The fluid ride that chugs along simply disallows any time we have to reflect on the history of paper; that is, unless we get stuck in front of the diorama, continuing to watch the mechanic arms move back and forth.

By nature, the Omnimover is continuously moving in one large, unbroken train; however, should there be a need to accommodate handicapped passengers, or someone forgets their purse on the ride, or gets their hand caught in the automatic car door, the entire ride must stop. An automated message begins repeating, asking guests to stay seated as the “time machine” will begin moving momentarily. The music continues, awkwardly breaking down the Disney narrative as riders start looking around, noticing ties to reality. The ride moves through the vignettes so quickly that there is no time to notice the emergency exit door (and to consider the dreadfulness of walking down all those stairs), the theatre lighting and black ceiling above, the fakeness of the dummies and the places where they needed to be repainted. When the ride stops, however, (which it does with *great* frequency), the magic seems to be lost.

The vignettes create a perception of nostalgia for these past times. According to Fritzsche’s definition of nostalgia, seeing Michelangelo paint the Sistine Chapel on his back, or the first performance of Oedipus Rex provides the “material evidence” in the form of common experience. For 4-15 seconds, we can be present at each of these events, peering into the commonly shared experience that allows us to share a kind of poignant loss for that we ironically know, but at the same time cannot know, because we weren’t actually there.

The ride presses on through history, Irons’ narrative inflection lightening as we encounter scenes of a huge newspaper printer, telegraph booths, radio broadcast stations, and projections of classic Disney movies on screens hung within the ride. The music changes to ragtime piano,

reducing the early part of the century to a formless joviality, ignoring the importance of communication in tragic situations like Black Tuesday, or December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. But still, there is no time to reflect on the scene as the cars keep chugging upward, closer to the top of the ride.

The tunnel leading to the top is criss-crossed with long strands of neon lights, representing the paths of communication created by the telephone, internet, fax machines and cell phones. The music picks up with sweeping violins and cellos leading us to the climax of the ride, the apex of the sphere. Irons cautions us: “But will these seemingly infinite communications become a flood of electronic babble? Or will we use this power to usher in a new age of understanding and co-operation on this, our Spaceship Earth” (frikitiki). As he says the words “Spaceship Earth”, the car spins forward, orienting us toward a massive projection of the Earth and its stars around it, cast on the top of the sphere. Irons poses an important question, perhaps the most important question asked of the way our technologies have manipulated meaningful human communication. We are focused instead on the gleaming Earth, supposedly transfixed by our common human identity as we look at our Spaceship so far away, when really we are surprised to be at the top of the “golf ball.” The music swells, matching the swelling in our own hearts for the poignancy of global unity by communication, to be ended abruptly by a cautionary announcement: “Attention travelers, please remain seated, your vehicle is rotating backwards for your return to Earth” (frikitiki). Again, the narrative is broken as the music swells, louder than before to mask the mechanical turning of the cars and their steep descent, backwards, to the ground.

The descent is devoted solely to exploration of the future of communication. I must admit, the descent is hard to focus on—the vehicles turn backwards because the decline is so steep, taking less than half the time it did to reach the top of the sphere. The mechanical noise of

the cars would be deafening, were it not for the music, seemingly twice as loud, covering up the noise. Again, we travel through short vignettes of kids interacting with other kids through video screens; a precursor to Skype. We see an American kid watching a Chinese news report—the first indication in the whole ride that there is such a thing as an Eastern culture, and that it has an impact on communication. Yet the moral imperative is made at the end of the ride by drawing a parallel to the scene of Earth at the top. “Since the dawn of recorded time, communication has revolutionized our lives and changed our world. We now have the ability and the responsibility to build new bridges of acceptance and co-operation between us; to create a better world for ourselves and our children as we continue our amazing journey aboard Spaceship Earth” (frikitiki). As Irons says “Spaceship Earth” for the second time, the cars pass by a model of the geodesic sphere, suspended magically around a sea of black as the Earth was at the top of the ride. Again, an important consideration about using our technology to foster better lines of cooperation among nations is glazed over for a dazzling model. The vapid, sterile sphere is the last image we have of the ride, the knowledge that our “Spaceship Earth” fosters a meaninglessness anti-cultural dialogue. From the limited scope of the ride, we gather no meaning. The sphere, the concept of unity and the future is kitsch, sterilizing and condensing the most important characteristic of human beings into a real-life slideshow of corniness.

### *The American Adventure*

At the opposite end of the park from Spaceship Earth, stands World Showcase’s flagship pavilion, The American Adventure. Many of the other pavilions have a small, stereotypically recreated street scene with restaurants and Disney shops located along the sides. When populated with college students from the home country, the scenes have a more “authentic” feel, as if one really does step, for five minutes, into another country. Of course, these scenes don’t show what

the present day countries are like at all, though they also don't show a complete picture of what the countries are like now, omitting the stories and contributions of immigrants, international cooperation and technology.

The American Adventure, by its distinctly colonial architecture, embraces a stereotyped, globalism-free aesthetic on the outside; however, unlike the other pavilions which portray their respective countries in a stereotyped, temporally irrelevant vignette, is devoted strictly and simply to American history. The 30 minute stage show, arguably one of the longest on the Disney World property, takes the audience on a journey through the emotional kitsch narratives of America.

Many countries initially opposed such a narrow view of their culture, causing Disney to continue the project with little support from the host countries (Koenig 166). The American Adventure, on the other hand, is the only corporate-sponsored pavilion in World Showcase, sponsored by Coca-Cola and American Express, and fashions itself as an old Georgian building. Since Disney had a large amount of funding for the project, they created a technologically advanced, animatronic stage show.

Early in the attraction's development, it became clear that the narrative wouldn't be successful if it ignored certain negative facets of American history. Whereas Chinese inventions may be lost on the general public, the intentional rejection of such atrocities like slavery from the American narrative would cause outrage. The solution, according to Andrea Stulman Dennett, was to select certain "difficulties" that would fit in within the pre-determined narrative. "The repercussion of this fill-in-the-blank attitude is that history is almost non-existent in this production. Characters are icons and historical events have been fabricated, symbolically



mythologized and compressed into vignettes” (qtd. Fjellman 100). Indeed, the inclusion of slavery references, the extermination of Native Americans, early cautions for the environment from an audio-animatronic John Muir, and the presentation of racial discrimination reduce anything that can truly be understood from these events. They are kitsch moments in history. Fjellman argues, “What makes the American Adventure different from Disney’s other historical dramas is that presentation of the warts draws attention to the historical amnesia elsewhere at Walt Disney World” (106). Not including the low parts would make the show seem farcical to anyone with a basic working knowledge of American history.

Each character rises on “stage” from up out of the ground (the stage is, in fact, a huge pit in which the machines can rise up and down for their cues). The show is narrated by audio-animatronic figures of Ben Franklin and Mark Twain, two of America’s most savvy historic personalities, coming together to tell the story of the American experience. Franklin and Twain take us through a harsh Puritan winter, the founding of the country, then jumps ahead to Frederick Douglass, pushing a boat along the Mississippi.

The vignettes of history takes us on a sleepy thrill ride—we celebrate at the founding of the country, then are immediately brought back down by the gentle reminder of slavery. Mark Twain says as Frederick Douglass rises, “Seems a whole bunch of folks found out “We The People” didn’t yet mean all the people. Folks like Frederick Douglass” (DaveLoneRanger). Samuel Langhorne Clemens would no doubt be insulted by his Disney visage; the staunchly abolitionist writer and crafter of one of the most important anti-slavery novels ever written would balk at his unassuming, non-accusatory claim. Twain portrays slavery as a sadly innocuous discovery, as if Douglass was seeking out the hidden repression of slaves. Years of the Atlantic Slave trade, brutal murders, human injustice and ignorance of dignity get reduced by Disney to

an “aw, shucks” moment, rectified only by the appearance of Douglass to tell us, “Even against the cricket’s song here, along Mark Twain’s beloved Mississippi, I hear the rattle of chains and the crack of the whip...[anti-slavery] is no longer a thing to be prevented. It has grown too abundant to be snuffed out...like a lantern” (DaveLoneRanger). We don’t actually get to hear any chains or whips, but we do see his lantern snuffed out as he speaks, encouraging us to move away from the painful history of human exploitation, to the next scene of a family whose sons fight on opposite sides of the Civil War. This vignette portrays the entire Civil War as family tragedy, with the Confederate son removed from their family photo, having died in the war.

In this moment, the competing nostalgias of the Civil War are made evident. Here we have two scenes of people expressly at odds with one another about what the war means to them. For us, again, we receive the nostalgic element by being present at the family tragedy, and at Frederick Douglass quietly musing on the river. We are attached to both forms of kitsch Civil War history, but which do we choose? Disney makes it explicit that we have to choose the family story over Frederick Douglass’ account. Though both invoke an incorrect feeling of melancholy, we have more experience with the son’s account, seeing the war recreated through their animatronic visages as well as on film through a montage of photographs. For kitsch to develop, there must be a sense of attachment, and there is not enough time in the show to develop it for Douglass. Binkley writes of kitsch, “[It has] love for all things sentimental, expressing a joy in feeling itself, whether that feeling is elation, sorrow or fondness” (142). We don’t take sentimental joy in Douglass’ story; after all, we are on vacation, and don’t want to be encumbered with thoughts of how awful our predecessors were to slaves. Instead of completely skipping over the Civil War, a move that would ridicule and criticize an attraction meant to be epic and awe inspiring, what we hear instead is a story about tragic family divisions. The moral

of our story isn't "War is hell," or "Slavery was incorrigible," our moral is, "Families are still families, even if they disagree about imprisoning human beings." The audience, sitting next to their fidgeting children and bored teenagers, now has the willingness to embrace the joy of sorrow presented within this scene. The story of the brothers makes the audience glad to be with their family, glad to be alive, and glad to be out of such a terrible part of history. This is all Disney allows us to take away, encouraging us to perceive the attraction as a moment of family unity. Valuable history lessons and tragedies are too serious of themes addressed in kitsch, and especially, in Disney World.

The attraction never gets as family-oriented; essentially, we see the same kind of scenes regarding Native Americans and women's rights until the end, when a loud, inspiring movie montage is created of important Americans in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Disney probably included this montage to be easily updated as new heroes would prove themselves in the American narrative. The scenes show heroes of entertainment such as Lucille Ball and Walt Disney (of course), important American leaders like Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., figures in American art like Norman Rockwell, miscellaneous inspiring figures like Michelle Kwan<sup>15</sup> and Ryan White, the inspiring figurehead for AIDS research, and finally, in its most recent addition, pictures of New York Firefighters raising the flag at Ground Zero (DaveLoneRanger). As the montage plays, a sweeping song of patriotism written especially for the attraction, "Golden Dream" loudly plays, bringing Kundera's tear to the eye of each audience member: "America, spread your golden wings, sail on freedom's wind, 'cross the sky."

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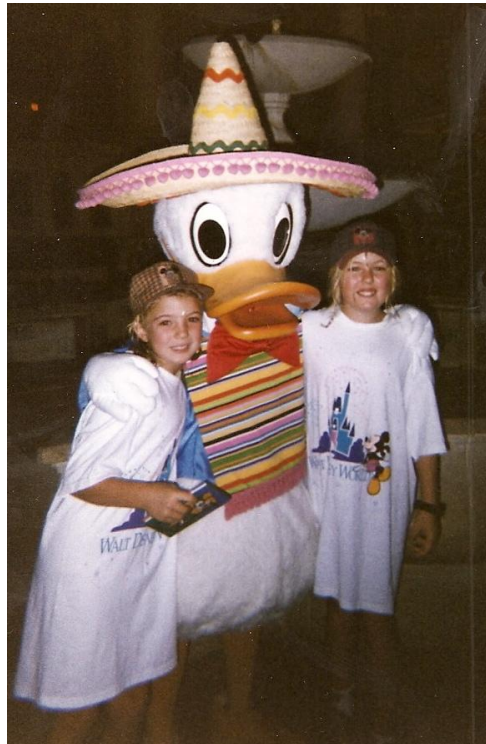
<sup>15</sup> It's probably only a matter of time before Michael Phelps replaces Michelle Kwan, a confusing addition given she's one of the most underwhelming American Olympians in history, having won zero gold medals despite her incredible talent.

The vague, meaningless lyrics juxtaposed with the image montage is, perhaps, the apex of American kitsch in Epcot Center. It is, in a sense, nostalgia, for we feel a bit of melancholy for the figures (all mostly deceased) on the screen. For two to three seconds, we have a swelling of emotion for Ol' Blue Eyes, the coffin carrying President Kennedy to Arlington, and the flag being raised on the day of immense tragedy. We get an appropriate amount of time to be reminiscent, sad, fond, and inspired before making any kind of legitimate thought about what we are seeing. Each event gets reduced to its sheer emotionality, finally ending with Ben Franklin and Mark Twain standing on the Statue of Liberty's torch. Such swellings of heartfelt patriotism and love of country compels the audience, nearly every time the show is played, to a *standing ovation*, praising Ben Franklin and Mark Twain for their oratory skills and historical knowledge. If Binkley is right, and "the taste for what is universally beautiful is fundamental to an emancipated, autonomous and disembedded aesthetic disposition, free from the 'interests' of politics, status and daily life" (146), then who better to represent kitsch sentiments of America than robots who are lifeless, physically unable to be autonomous or emancipated, permanently bound to a script written by a corporate entity wishing to portray American history in a narrowed scope? Understandably, at the end of the show, we are left with only the warm feeling of pride for our country, if only for five minutes, before we visit the gift shop.

### **1996-present: Epcot Theme Park**

1996 marked a huge change at Epcot. World of Motion, a farcical tour through the history of transportation, was the first original pavilion permanently closed to be replaced by a thrill ride. Test Track, opened in 1998 to rave reviews. For many years, the park had suffered from numerous complaints from kids, teens and even adults that the park was, as Koenig described, "too sterile, too austere." One sixteen-year old even quipped, "There's too much

educational junk over at EPCOT. If I want that, I can get it at school” (Koenig 241). Test Track was the first major step in Epcot’s transformation into a theme park destination. The ride, meant to simulate the testing of GM cars at a proving ground, was at the time the fastest ride on the Disney property. Lines for the ride can often stretch for up to two hours and longer, and after its opening, Epcot’s park hours were modified to accommodate for the large crowds. Though this ride was not the first step toward Epcot’s rebranding, the events that followed completely abandoned Walt Disney’s original philosophy in favor of a place that could compete with traditional American theme parks and be worth its extreme \$75.00 entrance fee.



**Figure 3: The author and her sister with Donald in the Mexico pavilion in 1996. The introduction of Disney characters in Epcot was one of the first major changes the Walt Disney Company made to the park in order to accommodate public criticism that there wasn’t enough “Disney” at Epcot. Donald sports extremely stereotyped Mexican garb, but still, no pants.**

The 2000 Epcot Millennium celebration resulted in two of the most significant changes to the park after the inclusion of Test Track. The first was the construction of a giant Mickey hand and wand on the side of Spaceship Earth. Through the celebration, the top of the wand was adorned with a giant “2000” that glimmered both during the day and night. Later, the 2000 was changed to a scripted “Epcot.” The second major change was the inclusion of the “Leave a Legacy” project in the front walkway of the park. For \$35, guests were able to have a very small picture taken of themselves to be embossed on a steel plate along with hundreds of other pictures and installed permanently on huge marble stones in the front of the park. The Disney website also offered an online portal in which the picture could be seen and a family tree could be created to “discover” more about the legacy left behind in Epcot. These two items, more so than anything, further cemented Epcot’s kitsch identity, but in a different way than it had before. The inclusion of the wand is farcical, completely reversing the gravity and austerity complained of previously in Future World. Kulka writes, “When the representation leaves nothing to the imagination so that its subject matter is instantly identifiable, the result is bound to be kitsch” (104). The hand was a physical kitsch manifestation of who exactly controlled the show, who exactly was responsible for all the magic. Mickey, as symbol both of Disney World and the Walt Disney Company, stood as a blatant, direct reminder of the fantastic craft of each of the pavilions. The hand allowed for the park to be placed in canon with the rest of the parks.

The Leave a Legacy project echoes Walt Disney’s idea of a community of tomorrow. The thousands of pictures that adorn the marble walls reflect people that gave money toward a conception of legacy. The idea of “legacy” is incredibly nostalgic. The program allowed for families to essentially immortalize themselves in Epcot. In a way, the program hearkens back to Walt’s original concept of a community of tomorrow; normal people in a permanent community

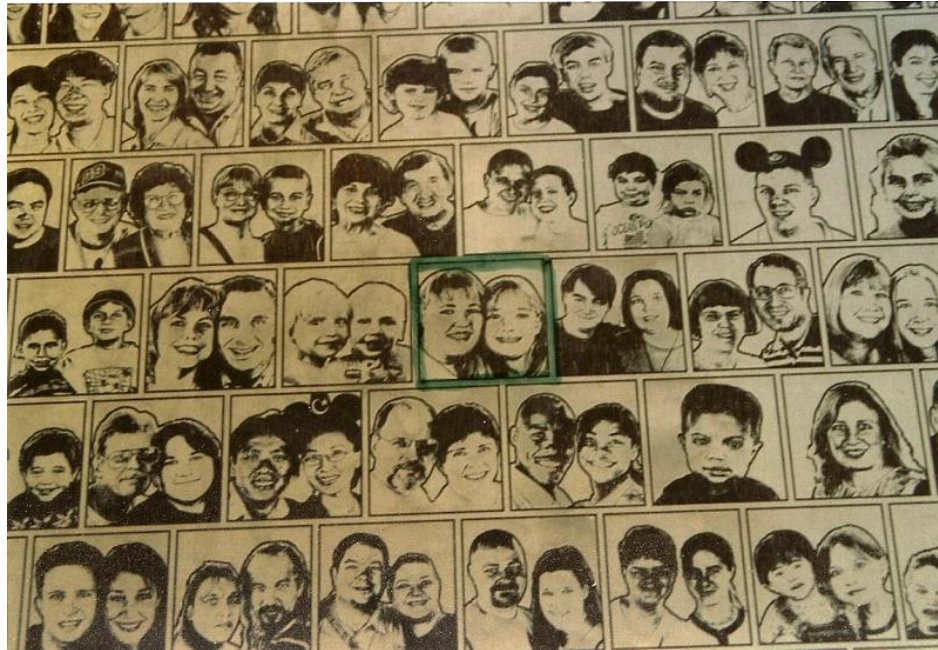
reacting to all the changes within. Primarily, however, the program distorts the concept of legacy and distills it down into a single picture of one moment. Again, history is reduced into a small simulation.

In 2000, my sister and I had our picture immortalized. It was an incredibly simple process—my mom paid the bill, we sat and forced our heads together in a picture, and six to eight weeks later, it was installed, remaining forever<sup>16</sup> as a moment in our legacy. In reality, I was really mad at my mom's insistence that I open my mouth to smile—at the time, I refused to show my braces in pictures because I hated the way they looked. Also at the time, I had very long hair, which my mom insisted I pull down for the picture (and is just about completely unseen in the actual photo). I must admit, it is really cool to go back to Epcot and see our picture there. That is really just about the only appeal of the project. Since there are so many faces on the walls (with room for many, many more though the program has ended), it doesn't make our appearance any more significant than anyone else's on the wall. There's nothing to be analyzed about the photo, nothing to be understood. There's no text, no context given for why it exists, why my mom chose to have us do it, and why my dad consented to it. My legacy has been distilled, at Epcot, to a picture of myself I don't even like. I certainly don't believe I'm alone in that complaint.

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<sup>16</sup> Or at least until 2020, when Disney has the right to remove the installation if they so wish.





**Figure 4: My family's legacy.**

I think, in this picture, I am Hermann Broch's kitsch-mensch, the lover of Kitsch. "If kitsch represents falsehood," he writes, "this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it, on the person who uses this highly considerate mirror so as to be able to recognize himself in the counterfeit image it throws back of him and to confess his own lies" (49). Disney allowed my sister and I a small, timeless mirror to reflect our desire for legacy, for our own continuation.

Maybe my sister and I are blatantly lying as Broch suggests we are. We say we don't need this picture to continue our legacy, but perhaps we really do. We want to have our picture on the wall as a lasting piece of our lives. I can't help but think when we visit of the hundreds on the people on the wall that have died, like a war memorial, commemorating we brave souls who paid a premium on top of park admission<sup>17</sup>. Do their families consider their legacy when they visit this place? Do they think of this photo in Epcot Theme Park when recalling the significance

<sup>17</sup> Is it possible to imagine a war memorial that would carry a picture of all who died on it? Would there be outrage at how personal it would become?



of their lives? It's a very American wish, to be remembered for one's actions in life. In the Leave a Legacy program, it makes that wish come true, thanks to the power of Disney, magic wand and all.

Eventually, other pavilions would give way to new and exciting ride designs, and rides with more relevance for younger families. Horizons was demolished in 1999 to make way for Mission: SPACE, a ride that has, since its 2003 opening, caused more injuries than any other ride on the property and required the placement of airsick bags for guests not accustomed to sustaining 2.5 g's in simulated spaceflight. In The Land pavilion, Soarin', a ride transplanted from Disneyland, provides another thrill ride in which guests can soar over California. Finally, The Living Seas pavilion was completely renovated, incorporating a Finding Nemo-themed aquatic theme for younger kids too small to ride the intense thrill rides.

For Disney, these modifications, though drawing away from Walt Disney's intent for the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow almost completely, were necessary to draw even more visitors to the park. New ride technology, after-effects from the drop in revenue following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the creation of mega-parks and mega-coasters and the increase in the cost of food and transportation all, in one way or another, contributed to the need for change, for more excitement within the park. Now, visitors can experience a kind of meta-nostalgia, feeling nostalgic for the nostalgia present within the old rides. Whereas Spaceship Earth retains its clunky Omnimover death traps in order to throw focus onto the pavilion, the thrill rides automatically place the narrative as less important than anything else. More importantly, however, even the identity of the park as a site of kitsch is marred by the thrill ride. If the park has no narrative thread, nothing to say, then it can't really be kitsch, for it doesn't present a historical narrative. The more Epcot moves away from Walt's original philosophy, the

less kitsch it becomes. And, from all we know about Walt Disney, Epcot can and must remain kitsch. “I am interested in entertaining people, in bringing pleasure, particularly laughter, to others, rather than being concerned with ‘expressing’ myself with obscure creative expressions” (qtd. in Kurtti 13). Walt Disney was the anti-Greenberg, the true kitsch-mensch, and his last and greatest dream should retain those same principles if they intend to preserve the creative and artistic integrity of its founder.

## V. Conclusion

*“How is this virulence of kitsch, this irresistible attractiveness, to be explained?”*

*-Clement Greenberg*

Kitsch matters. Kitsch matters because we like it. Epcot is the third-most visited theme-park, ushering in millions of visitors a year. On any given weekday, there is a 10-person deep line for the Frito Pie at noon. Specifically, we like American kitsch because our feelings are important. We are consistently striving to “feel something,” our heroes impart a certain kind of stirring within us. Kitsch provides an easy way for us to feel what it is we want to feel, by providing the emotion present behind the kitsch item and nothing else.

Kitsch in America complicates the need to validate one’s own personal emotions, regardless of the emotions of others. When I see The American Adventure, I want to feel on top as an American in the world, I want my patriotism for 30 minutes to pour out of me like hot magma. For the person sitting next to me though, keenly aware of their cultural significance being diminished in the great American narrative, they want to feel despondent for what is missing, to feel that hole when the show fails to mention Mexican and Latin Americans, or the other marginalized groups that actually contribute meaningfully to the American narrative. There is, however, a sense of significance for wanting the same item of kitsch, to have desires simplistically indulged.

Throughout my project, I hesitated to consider the morality of kitsch. Since it is based on conceptions of false, or idealized nostalgias, the ethical validity of supporting facets of culture based on untruth is a starting point for a range of questions. From my research, I conclude that appreciating kitsch whether ironically or sincerely isn’t inherently wrong, to a point. In certain

cases like The American Adventure, there is possibility for concern. I consider myself a lover of kitsch, but I know that it is kitsch. When I go to Epcot, I'm not seeing the truth when I see The American Adventure. I know there's something missing in Spaceship Earth. But what is worse? To go to the Five-and-Dime and relish in "authentic" local flavor? Or to know I'm nowhere close to it but go anyway? I think these questions insinuate kitsch is a lie. I don't think that's the case. Kulka writes, "The aim of kitsch is not to create new needs or expectations, but to satisfy existing ones. Kitsch thus does not work on individual idiosyncrasies. It breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone. Since the purpose of kitsch is to please the greatest possible number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators" (27). Kitsch isn't lying when it omits the truth. It omits the truth because it is playing to the common experience of those that perceive it. We must know that when we look at kitsch we are not getting the whole picture; to be not cognizant would be to not see kitsch. As long as we can recognize that kitsch satisfies the competing emotional needs and characteristics we as Americans seek based on our cultural and perspectival differences, then kitsch is neither right nor wrong. It exists as a facet of culture, endlessly intriguing.

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